

Billie at the B.F.G.

In glossy bifold and trifold brochures, photos showed her how great her life would be in Akron, the Rubber Capitol of the World. Women outfitted in oversized jumpsuits, fireproof gloves, and welding masks posed as they made rubber supplies for battle in Europe and the Pacific. In one photo they stacked rubber life vests neatly together. “A natural job for a woman,” the recruiter had said, “like folding laundry or mending clothes.”

That’s exactly what the B.F. Goodrich factory—the B.F.G.—had hired her to do: stitch together rubber life jackets. Day One was orientation and training. There would be a test before she clocked out, where she would demonstrate each step of the process.

“You’ve got to get it right on the money,” the man training her had said. “The smallest mistake could cost a man’s life.”

As the day went on he made fun of her accent and named her Hill-Billie. He called her bovine—the female form of stupid—every time she made a mistake. She failed the Day One test, but wasn’t fired.

On her way out of the factory doors, she knew she wouldn’t return. She stopped below an exit sign that read: “The more women at work, the sooner we can win.” It felt like the B.F.G. was a branch of the military, and she could be charged with desertion. She was surprised at how brief her guilt lasted.

Guilt was hearing her younger sisters cleaning the house and cooking dinner as she sat on the front porch, not helping them. Instead she watched a breeze lift a pile of dead flies from the outer windowsill on to the floor as she mentally cataloged the items in her travel trunk so she wouldn’t forget anything.

Guilt was seeing her father stumble near the old stables, up to his ankles in mud, with no shirt or shoes, only blue jeans rolled up to the knees. He gestured widely for horses to follow him into the barn, though they hadn’t kept animals since the Depression.

Guilt was slipping off without saying goodbye to any of them and traveling in a velvet-upholstered sedan as her family’s farmhouse disappeared through the thick trees. High in the hills, a black line of storm clouds gathered above the hollow. Tree leaves turned a pale shade of green, almost white.

Most of all, guilt was hearing news of her mother’s death—by lung disease—one year later.

Some of the brochures, she now noticed, had chewed edges. Digging deeper into the travel trunk she saw what she had been trying to find in the first place: her knitted mittens and hat. Three baby mice had made beds in them. Warm, they wriggled at her touch. She closed the trunk and left the house. She could stand the cold for another night.